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THE CLASH OF CONTENDING FORCES IN GREAT CITIES

CHARLES HATCH SEARS, D.B.

New York City

The city—why discuss the city? Is it not merely a habitation of man? What matters the habitation? “A man’s a man for a’ that,” and needs the restraint, consolation, and incentives of the gospel, whether he lives on the wide prairie, in a New England farm house, or in a modern city tenement. We have accustomed ourselves to live in town and small city, but we have not adjusted either our home or our church life to a great city. We are familiar with the psychology of the farm; the most of us were born into it. We have adjusted ourselves to the psychology of the village and of the small city, but we have not yet familiarized ourselves with the psychology of great cities.

The city—what is the city?

A city—that is where Dives and Lazarus both live.

A city—that is where men die of loneliness in a crowd.

A city—that is the land of plenty where men die of starvation.

A city is where a thousand people live on an acre of ground that they never see.

A city is where thousands live in a single block and never know that they have a neighbor.

A city is a place where may be seen both the glitter of vice and the glow of virtue.

A city is a place where vice centers in sunless spots, and where virtue shines in secluded places.

A city is all desert for some, all oasis for others.

A city is a place which some greet with a cheer; which others endure with tears.

But a city may not be characterized in epigram.

A Place of Contrasts

The great city is a place of contrasts, characterized by greater diversity of tongues than was heard in the tower of Babel; by such social contrast as neither Dives nor Lazarus ever knew; by such physical suffering as few but Job have ever conceived; by vices which were the undoing of Lot in Sodom; by such remorse as the Prodigal Son felt when he came to himself; by such virtues as those of the rich young ruler; by such insight as that of Nicodemus; by such devotion to humble tasks as that of Dorcas and her associates; and by such a passion for Christ as fired Paul and kept him aflame for a lifetime.

The great city may be seen from a thousand different angles, but no two angles will be found in harmony. Perhaps this is because the city is a diamond in the rough. When all of its facets are polished, they will fit together as symmetrically as those of a diamond and give out as great a luster.

But today the great city seen from one of its facets is economic law, hard and relentless; from another it is politi-

cal expediency, too often void of consideration for the *man*; from another, vice, repellent and hideous; from another, ignorance too dense to be penetrated; from another, culture, too indifferent to care—but again responsive and trained to act; from another, religious faith, now as impotent as a prayer before a mountain, but again strong enough to remove a mountain.

The City's Psychology

The great city has a peculiar psychology difficult to understand—a certain mental imperviousness, a certain emotional unresponsiveness. While writing these words I broke my glasses. Impelled by the imperative necessity of saving time, I prevailed upon myself to ask a neighbor to take the broken glasses to an optician, that I might be saved a two-hour trip down town. This I believe was the first time in my eighteen years of life in New York that I had asked a favor of a mere neighbor, one with whom I had had no established relations, business, church, or social. The feelings of a typical city man of the American type are as closely insulated as the electric wire which runs into a telephone receiver. He has an acquired instinct of fear—lest the feelings should get short-circuited by coming *into touch*.

Housing.—This peculiar psychology of the big city, and indeed the problem confronting both the home and the church, grows in no small degree from the housing problem. In New York City people do not own the houses they live in—only about one family in twenty-five. The consequence is that they are as migratory as the Arabs of the desert. A family lives in one locality today

and in another tomorrow. Today a particular neighborhood is German; tomorrow, Jewish; and the day after, Italian.

Individual isolation.—City dwellers lead detached lives, unknown in the office building where they work day by day, unknown in the apartment where they sleep at night, and unknown on the street where they walk at evening time, and thus is lost, the power of unconscious influence which is the greatest asset of the Christian church.

Too preoccupied.—In a city like New York life is overwrought—too preoccupied for religious thought, too busy and too strenuous for men to give themselves to voluntary Christian service.

Confused moral ideals.—In the tower of Babel—the modern big city—the confusion of tongues is a barrier to the progress of Americanizing and Christianizing the foreigner; but more serious than that is the confusion of moral ideals which grow out of a cosmopolitan life resulting in a general loss of moral intensity. What matters a religious conviction anyhow so long as good people hold diametrically opposite ones! Surely this moral confusion is far more serious than the confusion of tongues.

What Is the City's Challenge?

Such is the great city which we see over against us. The needs of individuals challenge our sympathy. We minister to those suffering from hunger and disease. We seek to bring to themselves prodigals from distant city, hamlet, and country-side, who in the faraway city, free from all restraints, are wasting their lives. We care for young children who need the sympathetic

hand of the Master of lives. We "big-brother" the men from distant shores who look to us for American ideals and who need America's Christ.

We have no question that it is Christian to look at the city from the point of view of individual need. We cannot forget that Jesus took notice of the flowers, that he observed the sparrows, that he took a little child and set him in the midst of them, that he commended the shepherd who left for the time the ninety and nine to look after the one lost sheep, that he regarded sympathetically the woman who rejoiced to find the one lost coin, that he used the father's reception of the prodigal as an illustration of the Great Father's solicitude for the returning son. Jesus' affectionate consideration for the individual life must control the action of every Christian who has the heart of the Master. We shall not study the city from this point of view but in looking at it from another viewpoint, it should not be forgotten that consideration for the individual and ministry to individual need is the primary concern of the Christian church and that our great aim is to bring men into personal relationship to Jesus Christ and to train them to apply the principles taught by him to every relationship in life.

How View the Conflict?

How shall we view the conflict in the great city? How do you regard the great war in blood-washed Europe? Are you among those who, stupefied by the awful carnage, are shocked into inaction and are doing nothing to decide the issues of the war, to mitigate its suffering, or to avert its recurrence?

Do you see the war from the viewpoint of the Red Cross or do you see it from the viewpoint of the general staff of some European government which is organized to win? The first group is merely horrified and does nothing. The second group seeks to attend the suffering, to minister to the wounded, to care for the fatherless and for the widow. Its work is remedial but is not immediately concerned with the issues of the battle. The third group is concerned with military strategy, with resources, with equipment, and with the supply of fresh forces.

The General Staff

In the great struggle to win the great city for Christ and the church we shall take the viewpoint of the general staff, and think in terms of strategy, and of resource, and of equipment, and of the enlistment of fresh forces.

Before staking our treasures, before we give the only life we have to offer to Christ and his church, we would know that the issue justifies the sacrifice. We have been brought to see that the conflict in great cities will determine in no small degree the issues of the Christian conflict in America as a whole.

Growth and Influence of Cities

There is fear in many rural communities lest the cities get the balance of political power. Already nearly half the population of the United States resides in cities (46.3 per cent). New York City contains more than one-half the population of its state, and indeed over one twentieth (5.2 per cent) of the nation—as many people as the states of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado,

New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington, combined.

That the Tammany tiger has broken from his cage on 14th Street in New York City and may be seen upon the lawn of the state capitol is but one indication of the city's political power. There is apprehension at this critical hour lest the great metropolitan dailies exert an undue influence upon the political life of our time.

Captains of industry, editors of great periodicals, corporation lawyers, eminent physicians, ministers in metropolitan pulpits—all these are coming to exert controlling influence upon the thought of our age. Many who have felt that this influence is not altogether good have been compelled to recognize its power. The city is a sounding-board from which reverberates throughout the civilized world the pronouncement of these leaders, whether for weal or woe.

How goes the fight?—In times of war we are trained to see things in the large. Seeing the long-drawn battle line extending through nearly a score of countries, and into three continents, we think not in terms of a single battle, but in terms of a campaign; we are interested in the issues, not as they affect one nation alone, but as they affect the world. We are losing our provincialism in the affairs of nations and ought to in the affairs of the church. How goes the battle in the great cities with the Christian church generally? We are agreeably surprised to find that the Protestant church as a whole, so far as its membership is concerned, is growing more rapidly than the population in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Boston, Cleveland, Baltimore—in fact

in all the cities of the first class save only New York and Pittsburgh.

What of the future?—If we are wise Christian strategists we shall recognize that the issues of the future are not to be judged solely by past victories. Here again not status but tendency must be gauged. We must look ahead a generation and ask ourselves how at that time shall the contending forces of the great city be aligned. Important as is bravery at the front and strategy on the field, yet more important in a protracted fight is the fresh supply of men from the home base. What are the indications of the fresh supply to our Christian forces in the great cities?

No longer Teutonic.—John R. Commons says of early American history that the population of the colonies was overwhelmingly Teutonic—English, German, Dutch, and Scandinavian—in blood and Protestant in religion.

Without wearying you with the detail of population it is sufficient to say that our great cities are no longer Teutonic in blood nor predisposed to be Protestant in religion. They have ceased to be that peculiar blend known as *American* which consists of a strain of Irishman, Englishman, Scotchman, Frenchman, German, and Scandinavian. At best an American is a thinly veiled foreigner. Scratch the skin of an American of the older type and the dermis is that of a German, a Frenchman, or a Scandinavian, but scratch the skin of a newer American and you find an Italian, a Pole, or a Russian.

No longer Protestant.—In brief, the raw material of our population in great cities is no longer predisposed to be Protestant and too often is alien to

those ideals upon which American life generally and the Protestant church in particular have been built.

In every great city the appeal of the Protestant church has been primarily to men of American birth or to English, to Germans or to Scandinavians. We have failed to recruit from those peoples who are now at the head in the make-up of the population of our great cities.

Suppose in the struggle for existence which is going on in Europe, Kaiser, President, King, or Czar should fail to enlist men from the most populous provinces or from cities like Berlin, Paris, London, or Petrograd. We should not think of attributing such folly to any European ruler and yet that is just the folly of which we Protestants are guilty.

Particular groups.—There are particular groups in all the great cities which remain to this day absolutely untouched by the Protestant church with not so much as an attempt to enlist them in our forces. There are colonies of other peoples, who are being reached in some sections, that remain almost impervious to American influences and absolutely out of touch with any Protestant church and too often antagonistic to American institutions.

Be not deceived.—There would be no occasion for alarm if these peoples were even in the process of assimilation or were being evangelized; but there is not so much as the first approach toward assimilating or evangelizing this foreign people or that foreign colony. We are not to any considerable degree recruiting our Protestant forces from the ranks of the foreign born, and especially not from those peoples not readily assimilated into our American life.

Child life.—As strategists of the church, as those who sit in council planning to recruit the ranks of our contending forces in great cities, we see another great source of supply—the enormous wealth of child life. Seeing ourselves in the swiftly moving procession which is passing from the stage of active life, we cannot be unmindful of the tumultuous mass pressing on from behind.

Not Protestants.—But what chance have we as Protestants to recruit our forces from the ranks of the children? A single illustration may suffice. A count was recently made of the babies in certain most congested districts of New York City. There were found to be 34,144 of them, but 30,506 were found in the homes of foreign-born parents. These children are not being recruited into our Protestant ranks. For the Protestant churches have removed from these districts.

The child life of New York City which is more abundant than in any other city in the world is not to be found in the neighborhood of our Protestant churches, surely not in the neighborhood of our self-supporting churches. It is estimated that there are a half-million children in New York City receiving no formal religious instruction whatever in either Jewish, Protestant, or Catholic institutions. These children must be reached mainly through co-operative church effort, as the Jews are doing through the Jewish community.

Can any of us imagine for a moment that the governments of Germany, France, and England will be unmindful of their dependence upon child life? Think of the value of a child in the future

of these countries. It would be the sheerest folly for their rulers to disregard the training of this child life, whether for military service or for the pursuits of peace. And yet the Protestant church has been guilty of just that folly in all of our great American cities. These children of foreign birth are characterized by as much strength of body, grace of manner, keenness of intellect, warmth of affection, strength of will, and capacity for religion as are the children bred in our own homes.

The New Strategy

How may the church address itself to this new strategy? Churches with a congregational polity have found the problem peculiarly perplexing. My own denomination, as the second largest Protestant body in the United States, has not taken its rightful place nor arisen to its obligation in the conflict of the great city.

Down-town churches in congested neighborhoods have been compelled to close their doors because the resources of the strong have not been available for the need of the weak; many new fields have not been occupied, while in other neighborhoods there has been competitive effort; and the evangelization of foreign peoples has been too largely neglected. We have been poor allies when it comes to the conflict in the great cities.

The American colonies, acting on the assumption that the best government is the least government, so long as they had to fight bands of Indians only, saw no need to federate and having a strong sense of local independence had no desire to do so, but, faced with a common

enemy too strong for any one of them, they learned to federate and, without surrender of individuality or state rights, together became the *united* states.

Congregational, Baptist, and Lutheran churches in their polity are true to the genius of the American colonies. They have found such polity peculiarly effective in working in hamlets, villages, and small cities; but, faced with new and changed conditions in great cities, they have learned too tardily the lesson of the American colonies and have been slow to federate in co-operative efforts, even with the churches of their own communion.

Generally speaking, where the church in great cities is most needed, where children swarm and alien races jostle, there the church is least prepared for its task and usually must withdraw entirely from it. It too often happens that the very poor think the church is cruelly unmindful of their misery, when as a matter of fact the particular church is suffering from a poverty almost as acute as their own.

A church in a community dominated by old-world prejudices and by new-world hates cannot have the ear of the community until it has gained it. It cannot gain it unless it can establish points of contact, unless it can minister to child life and follow these children as Theseus followed the golden thread in the labyrinth, till it leads into the homes of the poor and of the foreign born.

The evangelical appeal in church or even on street corners will not penetrate the seclusion of such homes, but warm-hearted Christian workers may. But to equip a church building for ministry

as well as for service and to provide workers costs large sums. A church in proximity to such need is the least prepared to meet the financial outlay. The retreat of such churches has become a variable route—some fifty from downtown New York within the life of a single pastor.

We have been fighting too much in detachments, localizing the conflict—a sort of guerilla warfare. We have seen the thing from the point of view of this church or of that church and not from the point of view of the city. A man may die alone, but he must fight in the ranks. Some Christians have shown remarkable facility for dying alone, but hardly for fighting together. The policy of building up this church as such has not tended to its stability or to its effectiveness as a religious agency. Naturally it has attracted to one spot the strongest forces. This is too much in line with the general tendency in cities to segregate vice and to localize virtue, or to barrel the salt and let the meat rot, to keep the leaven in compressed yeast cakes and let the flour mould.

We cannot possibly hope to win out in the fight for the city unless we can learn to mobilize our forces, to see the thing from the point of view of each of the churches and not of one in particular; so to marshal the forces as to take into account this foreign people which has no means of hearing the Christian message and of that poor district where a self-supporting church cannot live. Somehow the pastor of the First ——— Church must lose his provincialism and his church must lose its complacency, or conditions will steadily grow worse till the flood tide which is now forming will sweep the church from its moorings.

Home Rule

Every denomination to do effective work in the city must recognize that with all its diversity a great city is a unity, that the life of a city must be treated as a whole.

The city has become a new social entity; it has a peculiar psychology; it resents rural treatment; it demands home rule; it is itself good or bad and will express itself. A church that fails to recognize this, is a church that fails to grapple with the city problem, however much rural satisfaction there may be in another policy. The forces of a denomination in a city must have mobility, for the population is in a state of flux—whether the influx of the foreigner, the efflux of the old American stock, or the mere flux within the city itself, which defies all parish bounds or neighborhood limits.

The General Staff

Coming back to the analogy of the European war, we may say that the Christian denominations within the city must have a *general staff* to shape the denominational strategy, to think in terms of equipment and of resource, and to recruit not from a mere segment of the population but from the population as a whole.

The Imperative

The imperative is a denominational unity of purpose and habit of co-operation, a desire and ability to bring the impact of the whole denominational strength to bear upon a particular problem. How can any denomination serve as an ally in any general Protestant undertaking if it cannot mobilize its forces? This has been the weakness of federated church effort.

Denominational home rule in cities is not inconsistent with co-operation in the city work by the national missionary organizations of the denomination. That there is need of such co-operation is clear. So far as the evangelization of the newer American is a problem—and it is a problem, until turned into an opportunity—the strain is most felt in great cities where the foreigner is massed. One-seventh is in one city alone, 43.5 per cent in cities of one hundred thousand population and over—indeed 72.2 per cent in cities large and small. The industrial problem is most keenly felt in great cities. It is there that the struggle is most bitter. It is there that the older American forces upon which the ideals of American life have been built and upon which the Protestant church has most largely relied, are found in relatively small numbers. Dr. Josiah Strong was right when he said: “Let us bring everyone in the land into vital touch with the work in some city, near or far. Let every church make a money offering, small or large. Interest every Sunday school, every Endeavor Society, every Epworth League.” It is at this point that caution must be observed. We may not speak dogmatically of method of organization but it may be said with confidence that: *when the churches of a city look to an outside organization, whether state or national, for initiative in local work; when a city mission society or kindred organization is brought into a state of*

financial subservience or dependence, the cultivation of that unity and habit of co-operation so vital to denominational efficiency in a given city is thwarted, though particular good work may thereby be accomplished.

Can we not learn, as did the American colonies, to federate our churches, first those within a given denomination, for a common defense and for a common task thereby avoiding “the twin sins of overlapping and neglect,” and also perhaps the super-sin of suicide to which the Protestant church is tending in great cities.

Have we not in great cities “the moral equivalent of war”—something that calls for the red blood of courage and the white fire of consecration, something to induce Christian men to think in broader terms than personal ambition, business or professional success, the education of their children and the comforts of their homes? In times of war these things—life’s sweetest incentives—are subordinated to a great moral purpose. If Christian men are to win in the master conflict of the century, in the deadly clash of contending forces in great cities, they must heed the words of the Master:

He that loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son and daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake, shall find it.